

THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

*The Merger of
the Foreign Office and
the Commonwealth Office, 1968*



*Foreign and Commonwealth Office,
Downing Street, London, S.W.1.
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BACKGROUND PAPER

Introduction

On 15 March, 1968, the Prime Minister announced that he proposed to bring about the amalgamation of the Foreign Office and Commonwealth Office. On 17 October the new Foreign and Commonwealth Office came into being and for the first time in modern British history one Secretary of State became responsible for our relations with all other countries. For the first time, one integrated Office will advise on British foreign and Commonwealth policy as a whole, handle the diplomatic relations of Britain with independent Commonwealth and foreign countries and look after the administration of the Dependent Territories.

2. The new Foreign and Commonwealth Office draws together and weaves into a modern pattern many strands of tradition. Although its immediate ancestors were only two, the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office, it is the direct descendant of the long series of instruments of government which Britain has successively evolved to meet her requirements in relation to the changing world beyond our shores.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Foreign Office

3. The oldest strand in the pattern was the Foreign Office. A formal organisation for foreign affairs can be traced back in recognisable forms to the first half of the seventeenth century, when there developed a geographical division of foreign affairs between Secretaries of State for the Southern and Northern Departments. This division ended in 1782 when the Foreign Office came into existence—originally as the Foreign Department—with the creation of a separate office of State with Charles James Fox as His Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and with the playwright (and MP for Stafford), Richard Brinsley Sheridan, as his Under-Secretary.

4. In its early days the Foreign Office provided little more than a personal staff for successive Secretaries of State. But the nineteenth century witnessed a series of re-organisations and reforms, and the expansion of the Office, notably under Lord Palmerston, called for a new building, the present Foreign Office, which celebrates its centenary this year. One early reform was the institution in 1856 of a qualifying examination for the Secretary of State's nominees to the Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service, though it was not until 1892 that the Foreign Office clerkship and Diplomatic Service examinations became identical, and until Lord Lansdowne's reforms of 1905 that these were assimilated to the open examinations for the Home Civil Service. The 1905 reforms also initiated the transformation of the Office into a cadre equipped to advise on and influence the formation of policy; and into a highly organised machine for its execution.

5. An improved awareness of overseas needs followed in 1919, with the amalgamation of the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service, when staff serving at home and abroad became interchangeable. Further reforms launched in 1943 and continued after the war created the modern Foreign Service as a unified Service of the Crown, and solved a number of problems by the amalgamation of the combined Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service with the Commercial Diplomatic Service and the Consular Service, the latter having previously consisted of four separate branches.

6. These changes reflected the growing demands and increasing complexity of the management of external relations. Before 1914 only the Secretary of State, and occasionally the Permanent Under-Secretary, used a shorthand writer; and the Passport Department managed with one clerk and a door-keeper. (In 1967 the Foreign Office issued over a million passports.) The number of papers coming annually into the Foreign Office, which was 4,534 in 1821, showed a tenfold increase to 47,948 in 1900; the figure for 1965 (including the Foreign Office/Commonwealth Office and some joint Departments) was 779,891, roughly 170 times the volume of intake in 1821. A hundred years ago there were only five Embassies, all in Europe, and nineteen legations. Twenty years ago there were seventy diplomatic missions in Commonwealth and foreign countries. To-day there are 109 as well as a number of resident missions to international organisations.

7. The growth of the work called for a downward devolution of responsibility and the development of new techniques. The reorganisation of the Foreign Office in 1905 (which was based on the more advanced organisation already adopted by the Colonial Office at the time) required the younger officers to write their suggestions on papers passing through their hands. From this there has developed the modern system which trains junior officers for the highest responsibility from the start of their careers, by locating initial responsibility for consideration, advice and action at the "desk" level. The junior officer is not simply the executant of instructions handed down from above: he must make up his own mind on the right course of action, and submit his recommendations upwards.

The Colonial and Commonwealth Offices

8. The Commonwealth Office was formed by the merger of the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Colonial Office in 1966. But its predecessors have almost as long a history as the Foreign Office.

9. In 1660 a Council of Foreign Plantations was set up to deal with colonial affairs, in effect the settlements in North America and the West Indies. This Council later merged with the Council for Trade and Plantations and a Secretaryship of State for the (American) Colonies was created in 1768. The affairs of India were placed under the charge of the Council for Trade and Plantations for a while but in 1786 came under the Indian Board of Control set up by Pitt's India Act of that year. Meanwhile in 1782 the Secretaryship of State for the American Colonies, together with the Council for Trade and Plantations, were abolished: but the Council was reconstituted in 1784 under control of the Home Secretary. Actually in 1794, and more formally in 1801, responsibility for the Colonies was transferred to the newly

created Secretary of State for War, who remained responsible for them till 1854. In that year a new Principal Secretaryship of State for the Colonies was created and the Colonial Office thenceforward became the Department responsible for all dependent territories overseas except India. In 1857 the Indian Board of Control was abolished, a new Secretaryship of State for India created, and the affairs of India (and of Burma, though there was later (1937-47) a separate Burma Office) were thereafter managed by the separate India Office set up in 1858.

10. The need for further change began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. A new kind of country was appearing, in the form of overseas territories peopled largely or wholly by British stock and enjoying full internal autonomy. These territories were neither foreign nor subject to direct British administration. The process of their development was long, and there was no precise moment of time at which they became fully independent sovereign States. The internal organisation of the Colonial Office changed gradually to take account of this developing pattern. By 1907 these countries had begun to be known as Dominions. The war of 1914-18 took them a decisive step forward in nationhood. By the early 'twenties they had achieved effective independence. In 1925 the Dominions Office was created as a separate Department of State, formed from the old "Dominions Department" of the Colonial Office, to handle United Kingdom relations with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland and the (then) Irish Free State. In 1931 the Statute of Westminster formally confirmed the full independence of these countries.

11. Dramatic changes took place after the 1939-45 war. India and Pakistan became independent in 1947, followed by Ceylon in 1948; all three elected to remain in the Commonwealth. In one stroke the basis of the Commonwealth association was enlarged. The small group of countries, each owing allegiance to The Queen, became an expanding community of countries based on a common historical and administrative experience, and a widespread mutuality of practice, aspiration and interest. In 1947 the Dominions Office and the India Office were succeeded by the Commonwealth Relations Office. Ten years later the mid-century processes of decolonisation saw the rapidly accelerating move of former colonies in South-East Asia, Africa and the West Indies to independent statehood. Before the Second World War, the Dominions Office staffed three posts overseas. By 1967 the Commonwealth Office staffed twenty-seven.

12. As Colonies became independent, so the work of the Colonial Office diminished. By 1966 it had been decided that our remaining responsibilities in this field no longer justified the maintenance of a separate Colonial Office. The Colonial Office was wound up; responsibility for the affairs of the remaining dependencies was transferred to the Commonwealth Secretary; and the name of the Commonwealth Relations Office was changed to the Commonwealth Office.

The Plowden Report

13. The post-war revolution in communications; the increasing interaction and interdependence of international economic and political affairs; and the urgent demands of the British post-war economic situation all meant

that increasingly our missions in foreign and Commonwealth countries were doing the same sort of work. There appeared to be a growing anomaly in the maintenance of two separate Services in the external field, one of which had comparatively little experience of foreign countries, the other of Commonwealth countries. By the early 1960s it had become clear that a further review of overseas representation was essential.

14. In 1962 the Prime Minister, Mr. Harold Macmillan, appointed a Committee on Representational Service Overseas, under the Chairmanship of Lord Plowden, with the following terms of reference:

"To review the purpose, structure and operation of the Services responsible for representing the interests of the United Kingdom Government overseas, both in Commonwealth and in foreign countries; and to make recommendations, having regard to changes in political, social and economic circumstances in this country and overseas."

15. An exhaustive survey was made of overseas representation, which included visits to forty-two posts abroad, and the Committee published a report in February 1964 (Cmnd. 2276). After setting out the relevant considerations the Committee stated in paragraph 44 of the Report:

"The logic of events points towards the amalgamation of the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Foreign Office. The unified control and execution of our external policy as a whole which would result would be a rational and helpful development. This must, in our view, be the ultimate aim. However, to take such a fundamental step now could be misinterpreted as implying a loss of interest in the Commonwealth partnership. We therefore hesitate to recommend the establishment of a single Ministry of External Affairs as an opportune step to take at the present time, although this is the practice in all other Commonwealth countries. But we do recommend, as an immediate and urgently needed reform, the creation of a unified Service which will take in the duties, personnel and posts of the Foreign Service, Commonwealth Service and Trade Commission Service. We also propose a combined Administration for the unified Service, common recruitment and common conditions of service."

16. The Committee recommended that the separate Foreign and Commonwealth Relations Offices in Whitehall should continue in being, but that they should draw their staff from the combined Service. They considered that this proposal could not bring with it

"all the advantages which would flow from a total amalgamation. However, although the two Departments would retain their separate identities they would inevitably under our plan grow closer together in policy and practice; this is desirable in itself and will prove of help and advantage if in the future a full amalgamation is carried out."

The recommendations of the Report were accepted by Her Majesty's Government and the new Diplomatic Service formally came into being on 1 January, 1965.

Evolution since 1965

17. The creation of the new Diplomatic Service coincided with a period of great economic stringency. The imperative need for economy and the increasing emphasis being laid on the export drive called for a well adjusted and flexible diplomatic instrument. From its inception, the new Diplomatic Service set itself the task of meeting this need, and of providing a business-like Service to represent British interests in a competitive world.

18. The combined administration advocated in the Plowden Report was set up in the form of the Diplomatic Service Administration Office. This Office drew its staff from the Diplomatic Service and served the Commonwealth Relations Office and the Foreign Office equally, while being part of neither. New management methods were introduced and hitherto divergent procedures standardised. An Organisation and Methods team was established, and help and advice was sought and received from the Treasury Management Services Division. A detailed survey of the two Offices was made with the aim of bringing their operations closer together and of defining the areas in which joint working would be possible as a means towards the closer co-operation recommended in the Plowden Report.

19. First, the whole communications system was unified and rationalised by the creation of a single Communications Department. Procedures for handling telegrams and all other communications with posts abroad were standardised. Previously separate Departments handling establishment and personnel matters, accommodation, etc., were unified in the Diplomatic Service Administration Office services. On the basis of existing Foreign Office practice a team of Inspectors drawn from senior officials was developed to inspect all overseas posts both in foreign and Commonwealth countries on a regular three-year cycle. This system was later extended to the Offices at home.

20. Apart from administrative Departments other Departments in the Foreign Office and Commonwealth Office were replaced by a series of joint Departments, serving both Offices in those functional subjects where the work of Departments in the two Offices overlapped and was susceptible of such "joint" handling. Thus, joint Departments, responsible to both the Foreign Secretary and the Commonwealth Secretary, were set up to deal with overseas information and cultural relations; consular and nationality matters; overseas policy on aviation, shipping and telecommunications; and with work connected with the United Nations. A joint Protocol and Conference Department was created, and the research facilities of both Offices were amalgamated into a joint Research Department.

Situation in 1968

21. By early 1968 the process of narrowing the gap between the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office by the formation of joint Departments had been taken as far as it could so long as each Department was responsible to a separate Secretary of State. By March 1968 out of the seventy-two Departments, eighteen were shared between the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office. Thus by early 1968 about two-thirds of the total

diplomatic staff serving in London were working in joint Departments. It should be mentioned that this process of unifying the Service and bringing the Departments as far as possible together took place during the period both of exceptional international tension and of remarkable growth in the commercial work of the Service.

Merger

22. The ground had thus been well-prepared for the merger of the two Offices in London to which the Plowden Report had looked forward. On 15 March, 1968, the following announcement was made from No. 10 Downing Street:

"The Prime Minister proposes to bring about the amalgamation of the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Office into a single Office. He has asked Mr. Stewart to supervise this and to be responsible for the new Office. During this period Mr. Thomson will continue in Cabinet as Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs."

After consultation between the Foreign Secretary and the Commonwealth Secretary October was fixed as the target month for the establishment of the new Office.

Objectives

23. The operation had the three following main objectives:

- (i) To provide an efficient instrument at the centre of Britain's diplomatic operations, designed for the task of advising the Government, in consultation with other Government Departments concerned, on all aspects of overseas policy; of handling all information from and instructions to British diplomatic missions overseas including those to the United Nations and the international alliances and organisations of which Britain is a member; of training and managing the staff of the Service; and of conducting day-to-day business with the 106 foreign and Commonwealth missions in London.
- (ii) To ensure that in adopting, in line with the practice in other Commonwealth countries, a single Department of State to deal with all external affairs, there should be no detraction from Britain's partnership with her fellow member countries of the Commonwealth, and her capacity to contribute to that partnership.
- (iii) To make provision for dealing with the affairs of the remaining Dependent Territories in a way which would reflect the special responsibility of the Secretary of State for their good government and the welfare of their inhabitants and would ensure that the interests of the Dependent Territories were fully safeguarded.

Method

24. Three things were clear from the outset. First, a more radical approach was required than simply joining together as they stood those existing Departments of the two Offices which had similar or overlapping functions. Second, a common responsibility for taking full account of all

Commonwealth and foreign considerations must be laid fairly and squarely on the whole diplomatic organisation. Commonwealth and foreign affairs could not be considered in isolation from each other in the modern world. And third, the merger would require a period of consolidation and further adjustment in the light of experience before the final organisational structure and complement of the new Office could be settled. The arrangements to come into being in October would be a first stage. The process of rationalisation and streamlining which had been proceeding continuously since 1965 would need to continue after the formal act of merger in October 1968.

25. As part of the process of planning how the work should be handled in the new Office, a study was made of the organisation of equivalent Offices in comparable foreign and Commonwealth countries. Within the limits of the time available, advice on organisation was sought from outside as well as inside Government service, particularly from industrial and academic sources. Comments were invited from the Diplomatic Service at all levels.

The Structure of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office

26. A list of the Departments and Advisers in the new Office is shown as an annex to this memorandum. The first two categories, geographical and functional, are both "line" Departments in the management sense of the term. The "staff" Departments were already unified in the form of the Diplomatic Service Administration Office, and continue to provide management and administrative services as the Administration group in the merged Office.

27. The special contribution of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the national effort lies in its amassed and living knowledge of overseas countries. This knowledge is called upon constantly by Home Departments, by British industry and commerce and by the general public. Hence the need for a series of geographical Departments dealing not only with the political but also the bilateral economic relations between Britain and each individual country. Each geographical Department deals with these relationships within a coherent geographical grouping, e.g., East European and Soviet Department, South-East Asian Department, Latin American Department, etc. The Heads of Departments (whether geographical or functional) remain the pivotal officers of the organisation on whom its good functioning essentially depends. An Assistant Under-Secretary supervises the work of related geographical groups of these Departments. At Deputy Under-Secretary level the work falls into five main blocks of work—Europe; the Far East; America/the Middle East; Africa South of the Sahara; and Dependent Territories. (America and the Middle East are grouped together, not because of any necessary correlation between these areas, but in order to secure a roughly equivalent sharing of the supervisory work-load.) All these groupings are flexible and can be adjusted at any time to meet changing circumstances. There is also "vertical" flexibility, to ensure that current work does not pass up and down the whole chain of command. This would be impossibly laborious and time-consuming. The shorter chains of command used in practice aim at rapid handling of papers and at providing time for discussion of current and future policy at the appropriate levels. The equivalent main blocks of work at Deputy Under-Secretary level in the

functional fields are Economic; United Nations; Information and Cultural Relations; Planning, Research, Defence and Disarmament; and Administration. The same principle of flexibility applies.

28. The new organisation reflects the large and growing part which economic affairs play in Britain's relations with other countries and the paramount need for the Diplomatic Service to concentrate at the present time on activities designed to improve Britain's balance of payments. Whilst bilateral economic relations with individual countries abroad are the concern of the geographical Departments, there is need for functional economic Departments to handle in consultation with appropriate Home Departments issues which concern more than one geographical Department. Such issues are United Nations business, many financial problems and commercial policy problems (e.g., commodity questions), particularly those involving relations with international organisations. All these problems have a political and diplomatic as well as a technical aspect. Moreover as trade promotion in posts abroad is handled mainly by Diplomatic Service Officers the decision has been taken—in agreement with the Board of Trade—to establish an Export Promotion Department whose task will be to assist in liaison between commercial officers overseas and the Board of Trade, to be responsible for the training of commercial officers and to improve still further the services available from diplomatic missions overseas to the British business visitors and residents engaged in the export drive.

29. The economic side of the Office has been reinforced by the establishment of an Economists' Department staffed by professional economists and providing expert advice to the whole Office. Specialist advice is also available from the Legal Advisers, Overseas Labour Adviser, Overseas Police Adviser, Military Adviser and Historical Adviser. Expert advice on scientific matters will also be available in the new Office.

30. The Departments in the Information and Cultural block are responsible for the policy and administration of our official overseas information effort, now largely geared to trade promotion, and for maintaining the requisite links with the British Council, the External Services of the BBC and the Central Office of Information.

31. The number of Permanent and Deputy Under-Secretaries has been reduced through the merger by 25 per cent, and there has also been a significant reduction at Assistant Under-Secretary level. The system works flexibly allowing officials at the Under-Secretary level to respond to the demands of crises in various parts of the world, attendance at international conferences and bilateral discussions abroad, and seminars and conferences at home. Over one hundred posts have been saved in the first phase of the merger, in addition to the 398 previously saved at home since the unified Diplomatic Service was set up in January 1965.

Dependent Territories

32. The handling of the administration of the Dependent Territories has to be considered with particular care. In many cases their problems are inextricably involved with questions of foreign policy, as in Gibraltar and Hong Kong. At the same time Ministerial responsibility for their welfare and for the interests of their people is of a quite different order from that in the rest of the Office, as is the work of administering them.

33. It was therefore decided to retain, in one Dependent Territories Administration Division, all responsibility for the internal administration of the Territories and their relations with Britain; and to handle their external relations through the geographical Department dealing with the area in which they are situated. The Departments forming the Dependent Territories Administration Division are being relocated in the Downing Street building so as to be physically adjacent to these geographical Departments. These arrangements should ensure the maintenance of a corpus of specialised knowledge of the problems of the Dependent Territories, and facilitate the closest consultation and co-operation which will continue to be necessary between the Departments concerned with the internal and external aspects of our responsibility for them.

34. While it is implicit in the whole organisation of the new Office that all issues will from the outset be looked at in balance from both foreign and Commonwealth points of view rather than from one or the other, special provision has been made in the form of a Commonwealth Co-ordination Department for the handling of such matters as constitutional practices and relationships within the Commonwealth, liaison with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth bodies, and Commonwealth meetings and organisations. This Department will serve as adviser and reference point on these Commonwealth matters for all Departments in the Office.

The Future

35. This paper deals with the history of the two Departments and with the first phase of the merger which took place on 17 October, 1968. As the new Office settles down, the process of reviewing and streamlining its structure and adapting its methods to changing tasks will continue. The special machinery set up to organise the merger within the time agreed will continue in operation for this purpose.

ANNEX

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE DEPARTMENTS AND ADVISERS

Geographical Departments (including Dependent Territory Administration Departments)

Arabian Department
Central African Department
East African Department
Eastern European and Soviet Department
Far Eastern Department
Gibraltar and South Atlantic Department
Hong Kong Department
Latin American Department
Near Eastern Department
North African Department
North American and Caribbean Department
Pacific and Indian Ocean Department
Rhodesia Economic Department
Rhodesia Political Department
South Asian Department
South-East Asian Department
South-West Pacific Department
Southern African Department
Southern European Department
West African Department
West Indian Department
Western European Department

Functional Departments

Aviation Marine and Telecommunications Department
Claims Department
Commodities and Oil Department
Consular Department
Cultural Relations Department
Defence Policy Department
Defence Training and Supply Department
Disarmament Department
East-West Contacts Department
European Economic Integration Department
Export Promotion Department
Financial Policy and Aid Department
Guidance Department

India Office Library and Records
Information Administration Department
Information Policy Department
Information Research Department
Library and Records Department
Migration and Visa Department
Nationality and Treaty Department
Passport Office
Permanent Under-Secretary's Department
Scientific Relations Department
Trade Policy Department
United Nations (Economic and Social) Department
United Nations (Political) Department
Western Organisations Department

Administrative Departments

Accommodation Department
Communications Department
Establishment and Organisation Department
Finance Department
Inspectors
Office Services and Supply Department
Personnel Department (Operations)
Personnel Department (General and Training)
Protocol and Conference Department
Security Department

Advisers and Special Departments

Arms Control and Disarmament Unit
Commonwealth Co-ordination Department
Economic Advisers
Historical Adviser
Legal Advisers
Military Adviser
News Department
Overseas Labour Adviser
Overseas Police Adviser
Planning Staff